

Sermon Series: "Called to Be"

Sermon #2 - "Welcome people into a loving and caring church family..."

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I think I struck a nerve. The example I used in last week's sermon has elicited quite a response. To recap, while talking about how we are called to be community, I told the true story of a couple who visited this church for several months and then left because they felt like they never connected with anyone beyond the Sunday morning experience. I then asked the question, "Are we building an authentic, biblical community here at CCC?"

I have been amazed at the amount and the intensity of the reactions to that story. A few people have said, "Thank you for naming that because I have felt the same way." Other people were angry or offended because they felt I was criticizing the congregation in a very public way for not being more welcoming. So let me clarify, because that's a good lead-in to today's sermon. I did not mean to sound as if I was criticizing our church. If anything, the story was as much a reflection on my leadership as it was a comment on this congregation. While I wasn't criticizing, I was being critical, by which I mean stepping back and asking questions that will foster dialogue and conversation, like an exercise in critical thinking. Judgment from the number of conversations I've had this week about that story, I succeeded.

That conversation continues today as we look at the first line in our mission statement: "We are called to welcome people into a loving and caring church family." I spent the first month of my sabbatical studying this line more closely. I read several books about welcoming and hospitality, visited four other churches to see how they did hospitality, attended a church conference on making a good first impression, and carried on running email conversations with eight of my pastor colleagues on how they do welcoming in their church. And, boy, did I learn a lot! Much of my sabbatical final document is dedicated to this idea of how a church can be more welcoming and hospitable.

But before a church can address the "how" of welcoming, they first have to understand the "why." In other words, why do we want to welcome people in a loving and caring church family? What is our motivation? What's our hoped-for outcome or our "bottom line," if you will? If we strive to be welcoming but don't know the reasons why, there's nothing that separates us from a welcoming non-Christian organization.

We all have had good and bad experiences with hospitality. One of my favorite fast food restaurants is Chick-fila, which sadly they don't have up in this area. Not only is the food good, but the service is outstanding. I noticed once that if you say "Thank you" to a Chick-fila employee, they will respond with "It's my pleasure." Every Chick-fila employee in every Chick-fila across America. I once tested this by saying "Thank you" as much as I could to the person serving me. I did it so many times that I'm not sure it was truly that person's pleasure to serve me, but she never stopped saying it. Of course, Chick-fila employees are not hospitable to me because they want to be my friend or think I'm a super-cool guy; they want me to spend more money at Chick-fila. And it works! But a church is not in the business of making money. So what is our motivation for hospitality?

One of the books I read made a great point about what shouldn't be our motivation for hospitality. The author wrote, "Christian hospitality is not the same thing as making people feel comfortable so they will join the church. Hospitality is not for the purpose of meeting institutional goals – more members, bigger budget, more potential committee chairs." While I

don't disagree that we need to grow the church, based on this perspective I don't believe our motivation should be more butts in the pews or more bucks in the budget.

Instead, we should find our motivation in the same place we find all our motivations – the word of God as given to us in scripture. The author of Hebrews draws upon the wonderful story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming the three guests when he writes, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” We are called to welcome each person as if we were welcome a messenger of God, much as Abraham did when the three strangers show up at his tent flap. A welcoming congregation eagerly awaits the knock at the door, the visit from the guest, because they know it's an opportunity to herald the arrival of God in the guise of a stranger.

One of the things I learned on my sabbatical was that this church has spoiled me. I believe one of the things we do very well is to welcome people when they visit, so I have come to think that's how all churches do it. So I was shocked when I visited one church in June and felt the opposite of what this church offers. Not only did I not feel welcomed, I almost felt unwanted. The message my experience sent to me was a painful one: I don't matter.

And yet that's contrary to scripture, isn't it? We are told over and over again in scripture that we matter to God. Jeremiah tells us that before we were formed in the womb, God knew us. Jesus tells us in Matthew that even the hairs on our head are counted by God. That's a higher number for some of us than for others. And John writes in his first letter, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” Children of God! Regardless of what the world tells us, we matter because God loves us.

So if that's the message we hear from the pulpit, is that congruent with the message guests get during other parts of their visit? One of the reasons I like going to Chick-fila is because I feel like I matter to them. And I believe people come to church because they want to know that they matter to God. Does a guest's experience leading up to the sermon communicate that fact? Do guests feel like they matter in the parking lot, in the narthex, as they read the bulletin, as they are greeted by the congregation? If they perceive a different message, like I did during my church visit, they are much less open to hearing that they matter to God when it's preached in the sermon.

In my email conversations with my pastor friends, one of things I asked them to do was to complete this sentence: “The one program/ministry/action at my church that is absolutely essential to visitors feeling welcomed and wanting to return is _____.” And do you know what almost every single one of them said? It wasn't their colorful brochures or brightly lit sanctuary or the greeting time during worship. They said it was the welcoming attitude of the congregation. It was the congregation's commitment to making sure each person who visited felt like they mattered.

Thankfully, this is a responsibility we all can share and participate in. You don't have to be ordained, know how to crunch numbers or run a smooth meeting to be hospitable. All you have to do is see the other person through the eyes of God, as a child who is looking for something, something that could change their lives and give them hope. What if we treated every guest as if our interaction with them could make the difference in their visit?

And what if we saw each guest as someone who could potentially change us? As you think about the wonderful people we have in this church, realize that at one time or another, every one of them was a first-time visitor. Every one of them! About two years ago a young couple visited our church for the first time. They felt welcomed, so they decided to come again. And again. And then one day the man said, “I'd like to do my student ministry work here.” And

so Michael Swartzentruber and his fiancé Rebecca Hampu joined our church. How would this church be different if they didn't feel welcomed here and decided not to come back? The next person who visits us may be a messenger from God, sent here to have a tremendous impact on CCC, and we are called to make sure they feel like they matter. Yes, our church has something to offer guests, but I believe guests have something to offer us, as well.

Ultimately what we do when we choose to be hospitable to a guest is we give up some of what we have to share with them. We are making space in our church for someone else. We are making room in our hearts, room in our schedules, room in our budget, much like Sarah and Abraham made room at their table and the innkeeper made room in the stable for Mary and Joseph. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen puts it this way: "Hospitality is the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer then a space where change can take place." We don't do the changing – that's in Christ's job description. But by our efforts, we create the welcoming environment for that change to happen.

As you know, Leigh and I are trying to sell our house. That's not a lot of fun right now. To try and entice potential buyers, Leigh bakes a bunch of chocolate chip cookies right before a showing so that the house smells like freshly baked cookies as people walk through. We need a lot more people to come see the house right now because we're out of cookies! My hope is that when people visit this church for the first time, they experience the spiritual equivalent of chocolate chip cookies. I pray they see several smiling faces, hear a bunch of hearty "hellos", shake the hands of many greeters, taste the goodness of our coffee fellowship treats and experience what true hospitality feels like. In short, I pray they find what they are looking for and that God blesses us by using us to help them find it.

I am so thankful to be part of a church that is so welcoming. In fact, I had one couple that visited tell me they weren't going to come back because we were too welcoming. Believe me, that's a great problem to have! But that doesn't mean we should get comfortable and assume this isn't an area where we can grow. Because I believe God is going to continue to send people through those doors and we have to be ready, because you never know when we may be entertaining angels. "We are called to welcome people into a loving and caring church family."